



# School-parent partnerships: a short guide

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*“This booklet ought to land on every headteacher’s desk in the country. It is as close to the definitive guide to forming partnerships with parents as I have seen. It is first class.”*

Gareth Todd Jones, Headteacher, Pen Pych Primary School



## Introduction

Involving parents in the life of a school can seem difficult and burdensome for busy teachers who are being asked to take on more and more responsibilities but, done well, it can improve pupils' achievement and aspirations as well as transform the atmosphere in a school. This is what staff, parents and young people have told us, and it is their views on what works best that form the basis of this booklet.

Many schools do a very good job forming partnerships with parents, but it can be a delicate balance. In some schools parents are all too easy to engage, in others it is a constant struggle. In secondary schools, the business of parental involvement is often much more complicated than in primary schools.

We hope that some of the ideas here, taken from interviews with a variety of schools, parents and young people, will be new and inspire schools to think about ways of getting parents more involved in children's education on all sorts of different levels.

It is also worth remembering that strong partnership work between the school and parents can be included in the overall school improvement plan, and that parents can help to contribute to the school's self-evaluation for Ofsted inspections.

As well as practical tips, this guide contains pointers about where to go for further information, advice and additional materials.

We would like particularly to thank the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for funding our research work in this area, which has resulted not only in this booklet, but also in the full report *School-parent partnerships: emerging strategies to promote innovation in schools* which you can order on our website [www.familyandparenting.org/publications](http://www.familyandparenting.org/publications).

The full report is based on interviews with parents, young people and teachers. It includes:

- models for building effective partnerships between parents and schools
- case studies – schools and agencies
- factsheets for parents and schools.

**For more information about the research, log on to:**

[www.familyandparenting.org/school-parentpartnerships](http://www.familyandparenting.org/school-parentpartnerships)

## Ten ways to build effective school-parent partnerships

- ▶ Appoint dedicated link staff members to liaise between parents and the school
- ▶ Improve communications in both directions: listen to parents and they will listen to you
- ▶ Develop one-to-one relationships between parents and staff: talk more, write less
- ▶ Help parents understand more about what their child does at school
- ▶ Involve more parents more often in decision-making
- ▶ Develop and encourage parent support groups, social events and holiday schemes
- ▶ Celebrate success: tell parents about the good things as well as the bad
- ▶ Help parents to build their own confidence and skills
- ▶ Take advantage of the skills and experience parents can offer
- ▶ Have a clear complaints policy in place and treat complaints positively

## Appoint dedicated link staff members to liaise between parents and the school

*And not knowing anybody in the area, first person I spoke to was E [the link-worker]. And [she said] 'Oh I do this and this and this. Come on, you can come join us.' And then I started ... and now I've made friends. So I'm a bit more confident about coming into the school, talking to other people and doing other courses that go with the school. And it benefits [my child] at the end of the day. So, [I am] much happier coming in and doing it now than what I was when I first started.*

(mother, primary school)

- Consider appointing one or more dedicated school-home link workers.
- Think of flexible ways of employing link workers, or combine with other schools to share resources.
- Consider employing people who are already parents in the school and training them.
- Appoint link workers who are approachable, non-judgemental, well organised and confident to talk to staff at all levels and all parents.
- Look for link workers who have close connections with communities or individuals who are less engaged with the school.
- Ensure the link worker has the support and confidence of the school, can make quick responses and decisions on behalf of the school, and has a clear channel of communication to the head and senior management team.

**For more information about how to employ a school-home link worker, follow these links:**

[www.schoolhomesupport.org.uk](http://www.schoolhomesupport.org.uk)

Case studies from schools and how School-Home Support can help your school.

[www.tda.gov.uk/psa](http://www.tda.gov.uk/psa)

Results of the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) pilot of a new role in schools, the Parent Support Adviser, with resources, case studies, success factors and learning from the pilots.

[www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/deliveringservices/multiagencyworking/workingwithothers/whatitmeansforme/familysupportworker](http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/deliveringservices/multiagencyworking/workingwithothers/whatitmeansforme/familysupportworker)

How staff can work through multi-agency teams e.g. BEST (Behaviour and Education Support Team).

## Improve communications in both directions: listen to parents and they will listen to you

- Find out from parents the best way to communicate with them – it will be different for different parents.
- Try communicating with them using email, texting and telephone.
- Tell parents how they can contact the school e.g. give them telephone numbers and staff email addresses so they can talk to more senior staff. Explain who they can talk to and when.
- Make sure that all relevant information is on the school website and keep it up to date. Calendar dates, holiday dates, uniform costs and planned school trips with costs are all important for parents to be able to plan ahead. Tell parents it is there.

### For more information about consulting parents, follow these links:

[www.familyandparenting.org/Filestore/Documents/publications/listening\\_to\\_parents.pdf](http://www.familyandparenting.org/Filestore/Documents/publications/listening_to_parents.pdf)

Short guide for people working with children and families and local authorities who want to listen to parents' views on services and local authority policies. Designed to offer clear guidance based on research into what works when listening to parents, with some practical ideas about how to listen to parents effectively.

[www.familyandparenting.org/school-parentpartnerships](http://www.familyandparenting.org/school-parentpartnerships)

Factsheet for schools

*Schools consulting parents*

[www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/parentalinvolvement/pics/pics\\_multiethnic\\_menu/pics\\_m\\_home](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/parentalinvolvement/pics/pics_multiethnic_menu/pics_m_home)

How home visiting works in a secondary school.

## Develop one-to-one relationships between parents and staff: talk more, write less

- Use link staff members to talk to individual parents and carry out home visits.
- Invite parents to family learning events, parenting classes, social events, parent information workshops, language classes: provide childcare, refreshments, interpreting, help with transport etc.
- Consider holding some events without teaching staff present as a means of overcoming anxiety or hostility towards the school.

**For more information about engaging parents, follow this link:**

[www.familyandparenting.org/school-parentpartnerships](http://www.familyandparenting.org/school-parentpartnerships)

Factsheets for parents

*Parents matter for children's safety, health, happiness and learning*

*Communication with your child's school*

## Help parents understand more about what their child does at school

*“If your child's not doing well, you'd rather hear it now rather than in six months time and say 'Oh well she's not doing so well!'”*

(mother, secondary school)

*“... for most classes, they've got interactive white boards and ... they've got these things that are like eggs, these ... like doing quizzes like on the last lesson stuff, using the egg, and it's like answer a, b, c or d, stuff like that. And it's more fun than anything, than just, in like reading out questions and writing down on a piece of paper.”*

(secondary school student)

- Use homework diaries to keep parents informed about what work their child should be doing and as a way for parents to send messages to the school. Make sure staff always respond to messages from parents and pupils.
- Use pupil tracker reports to keep parents informed throughout the year and make sure parents understand them.
- Don't wait until the end of the year to hold parents' evenings; parents like them in the middle of the year so they can help teachers nip potential problems in the bud.
- Find additional, less formal ways of meeting with parents through the year e.g. form meetings or telling parents that teachers are available at a regular day and time once a fortnight.

**For more information about helping parents understand what their child does at school, follow this link:**

[www.familyandparenting.org/school-parentpartnerships](http://www.familyandparenting.org/school-parentpartnerships)

Factsheets for parents

*Homework*

*Talking with children about school*

## Involve more parents more often in decision-making

- Accept that only a very small number of parents will want to be actively involved in formal mechanisms like Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) or as school governors.
- Develop new and different ways of telling parents what you are doing and seeking their views e.g. a welcome event with food and drink to consult parents; a parents' section of the school website.
- Consider setting up a Parent Council or Forum.
- Never underestimate the interest, intelligence or potential contribution of any parent or make assumptions about them and what they are interested in.
- Remember that parents are often short of time (some of them may work as teachers or heads in other schools and many school staff are also parents): value their input.
- Talk to parents about things which are relevant to them: if you don't know what parents are interested in, ask them.
- Keep telling parents what you are doing, and why, and let them know how their input has made a difference.
- Identify the barriers that stop parents contacting the school and find ways to address these.

**For more information about involving parents in schools, follow these links:**

[www.familyandparenting.org/startingSchoolProject](http://www.familyandparenting.org/startingSchoolProject)

For ideas about running workshops for parents with PowerPoints, workshop plans, factsheets, case studies, link to DVD clips of a variety of workshops in schools and links to independent evaluation reports.

[www.governornet.co.uk/publishArticle.cfm?contentid=1149&topicAreald=3&pageStart=1&sortOrder=title&searchWhere=all&searchString=setting%20up%20a%20parent%20council](http://www.governornet.co.uk/publishArticle.cfm?contentid=1149&topicAreald=3&pageStart=1&sortOrder=title&searchWhere=all&searchString=setting%20up%20a%20parent%20council)

How to set up a Parent Council, with PowerPoint, booklet, leaflet and Statutory Guidance.

## Develop and encourage parent support groups, social events and holiday schemes

- Set up practical support groups to help parents be more involved in their children's learning and in the life of the school. Find out if local voluntary groups or faith organisations can help.
- Enable parent groups to be autonomous but support them by providing dedicated support staff, space in which to meet, photocopying, childcare, information about funding applications etc.

**For more information about enabling parents' groups, follow this link:**

[www.familyandparenting.org/school-parentpartnerships](http://www.familyandparenting.org/school-parentpartnerships)

Case study about the Superdads group at Pen Pych Primary School.

## **Celebrate success: tell parents about the good things as well as the bad**

- Use all your communication methods to tell parents about the successes of the school and individual pupils.
- Give children certificates to take home or send letters or postcards to parents congratulating their children on their successes.
- Use the local press to raise the profile of the school in the local community.

**For more information about using a variety of ways to communicate with parents, follow this link:**

[www.familyandparenting.org/school-parentpartnerships](http://www.familyandparenting.org/school-parentpartnerships)

Case study about Henry Cort Community College.

## Help parents to build their own confidence and skills

*“Some [parents] feel that they are only called up when their child is in trouble. That they are only here because they are called up. So really, indirectly, they are being told off ... ‘this is what your child has done!’ ... For some parents school virtually is a ‘no-go area’ for whatever reasons ... And the intimidation that just comes with stepping inside the building. Let alone if they are going to be speaking to a teacher. Because the teachers are there to do their particular role, they will do it in ‘their teacher way’. Some [parents] find that difficult to cope with.”*

(support worker, primary school)

- Find ways to address the negative feeling some parents may have about their own experience of school by organising an informal welcome evening or offering a family learning programme.
- Adopt a non-judgemental approach to parents: value and respect each parent as an individual.
- Help parents to have a better understanding of what their child is learning at school through taster lessons for parents or inviting them to sit in on a class.
- Help parents find information about how they can get support in bringing up their children e.g. by organising an informal marketplace and information workshop for parents or establishing a permanent information point for parents at the school entrance.

### For more information about supporting parents, follow these links:

[www.niace.org.uk/research/family](http://www.niace.org.uk/research/family)

For information about family learning projects and conferences.

[www.familyandparenting.org/startingSchoolProject](http://www.familyandparenting.org/startingSchoolProject)

For ideas about running workshops for parents.

## Take advantage of the skills and experience parents can offer

- Set up a register of parents' skills and expertise: be imaginative about what parents might be able to offer.
- Use parents as a resource for careers advice.
- Make parents feel welcome and make it clear what you expect of them: use link workers to support the relationship between the parent and the school.
- Consider (and encourage parents to consider) how children and young people might be affected by their parents being in school.

**For more information about welcoming parents, follow this link:**

[www.familyandparenting.org/school-parentpartnerships](http://www.familyandparenting.org/school-parentpartnerships)

For case studies and how to order the full report, which includes many practical examples of how schools are developing a two-way dialogue with parents.

## Have a clear complaints policy in place and treat complaints positively

- Tell parents how to complain and how the school will respond; make sure that one named person is the first point of contact for parents.
- Think of complaints as one way of finding out how parents feel about the school and a source of information to help you make improvements.
- Acknowledge directly the strong emotions that parents may feel.
- Apologise if the school has made a mistake.
- Do not be overly defensive of the school or the individuals within it.
- Tell all parents when you have made changes in response to complaints.

**For more information about school complaints procedures, follow this link:**

[www.governornet.co.uk/linkAttachments/School%20Complaints%20Procedure.doc](http://www.governornet.co.uk/linkAttachments/School%20Complaints%20Procedure.doc)  
For detailed Department for Children, Schools and Families guidance on how to implement and publicise a school complaints policy.





We have talked to schools, parents and young people about what works and what does not work when it comes to building school-parent partnerships. Based on our research, this short guide includes:

- ten ways of ensuring that school-parent partnerships are effective
- practical tips
- where to go for further information, advice and resources.

This publication is for headteachers, link workers, participation officers, school-home liaison officers and all professionals who work with schools to promote good relationships between parents and schools.

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The Family and Parenting Institute researches what matters to families and parents. We use our knowledge to influence policymakers and foster public debate. We develop ideas to improve the services families use and the environment in which children grow up.

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